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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: DID MK AZMI BISHARA PASS SECRETS TO HIZBALLAH  
DURING THE WAR?

Classified By: Ambassador Richard H. Jones, for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (S/NF) SUMMARY: Israeli-Arab MK and Balad party leader Azmi Bishara left Israel in early April amid rumors that the security services were preparing a case against him for unspecified security offenses. While a gag order prevents public discussion of the case by GOI officials, contacts have told us that the GOI has evidence to charge Bishara with treason for passing information to Hizballah during last summer's war in Lebanon. Shin Bet Chief Yuval Diskin told the Ambassador on April 17 that Bishara "has good reason to consider whether or not to come back" to Israel. Bishara has himself announced plans to resign from the Knesset, suggesting that he might seek asylum abroad. Regardless of the outcome, this newest case against Bishara -- a controversial figure with a difficult personality (see bio note) -- is almost certain to further widen the already large gulf separating Israeli Jews and Arabs in the wake of last year's war. END SUMMARY.

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Does the State Have a Case?  
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12. (U) In early April, Arab-Israeli MK Azmi Bishara, leader of the three-seat Balad party bloc in the Knesset, left Israel for a family vacation in Jordan. He has not yet returned. Since then, sources in either the GOI or Bishara's party have leaked stories to the press that Bishara is under investigation for national security-related offenses stemming from his contacts and activities in neighboring Arab states. Speaking from Qatar, Bishara announced plans to resign from the Knesset, hinting that he might seek asylum abroad. While a gag order prevents further public discussion of the case by GOI officials, an Israeli judge responded to a petition from press outlets by confirming on April 15 that an investigation against Bishara was ongoing and that unspecified charges might be filed.

13. (S/NF) During an April 17 meeting with the Ambassador, Shin Bet Chief Yuval Diskin confirmed that the GOI had good evidence against Bishara, but declined to reveal any details, citing the gag order. He said more details would be published in the next week or two, and that Bishara "has good reason to consider whether or not to come back." He added that unlike in previous cases against him, "this time he is facing something far more difficult; he laughed at the police before, but we (Shin Bet) are involved now." Diskin said that Bishara understands the difference and was thus "making arrangements" for a possible self-imposed exile. Diskin also speculated that press leaks about the case were coming from Bishara's camp, not the GOI, and that they might represent an attempt by Bishara's potential successors to ensure his permanent exile from Israel.

14. (S/NF) Udi Levi, Director for Counterterrorism Finance at

the National Security Council (protect), was more forthcoming, telling econoff and visiting Treasury officials last week that Israeli police had evidence to arrest Bishara for treason. Levi said security services had incontrovertible evidence that Bishara passed information to Hizballah during last summer's war in Lebanon, and were left with no choice but to press charges. Levi said that it was not in Israel's interest to have a divisive trial against a sitting MK, and feared that it would cause great unrest among Israeli Arabs. To avoid this, they leaked the information to Bishara, essentially telling him: "Do not come home." According to an Embassy contact at the Knesset, staff in Strategic Affairs Minister Avigdor Lieberman's office also claimed that the GOI had evidence that Bishara passed intelligence to Hizballah during the war. It is unclear whether these acts were alleged to have taken place while Bishara was in Israel or during his highly controversial wartime trip to Damascus and Beirut.

¶5. (C) Rina Rosenberg, Advocacy Director at Adalah -- an Israeli-Arab legal action NGO that has successfully defended Bishara in ten separate cases (including two criminal ones) over the past decade -- confirmed that Bishara appeared to be in bigger trouble this time than in years past. Rosenberg said the GOI had even been able to obtain a wiretap on his phone, which in the case of an MK, requires approval of the Shin Bet Chief, the Attorney General, and at least one Supreme Court Justice.

¶6. (C) The gag order on the case against Bishara expires on April 23, although the state could seek additional weeklong extensions. If charged with a national-security related offense, the Knesset will likely revoke his parliamentary immunity in order to proceed with prosecution.

TEL AVIV 00001147 002 OF 003

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Not Good for Jewish-Arab Relations  
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¶7. (C) COMMENT: Regardless of any eventual charges, the new case against Bishara exacerbates the ongoing social fallout of the 2006 summer war in Lebanon, which renewed the Jewish fear of an Arab fifth column within Israel, and which reinforced Arab citizens' perception of themselves as second-class citizens. The absence of bomb shelters to protect Arab residents in the north from Hizballah rockets -- and the inflammatory statements of some Arab-Israeli leaders during the war -- had a profound effect on both communities, and served to further widen the large gap between Arabs and Jews in Israel. If Bishara is charged with treason, espionage or some other serious national-security offense, the fears of an Arab fifth column will grow and Arab Israelis will find themselves under greater suspicion from the Jewish majority than ever before. If the state files lesser charges, or if the evidence compiled is not as solid as our contacts suggest, then Bishara and other leaders in the Arab community will argue that the case was just another example of Arab persecution at the hands of the Jewish majority. Discussing the case with poloff on April 17, Deputy National Security Advisor Eran Etzion said that for this reason, he expected the state would not file charges unless it was sure it had an airtight case. In either event, the outcome would not help the fragile state of Jewish-Arab coexistence in Israel.

¶8. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: Israelis -- Arabs and Jews alike -- believe that Bishara has been testing the limits of legality for many years, and none of our contacts expressed surprise at the thought that Bishara might have gone too far this time and that the state might have caught him. If he has crossed the line, the best outcome for both communities might be for Bishara to refrain from returning to Israel, thus allowing the GOI to fold without revealing its hand. In the event of a trial, pundits reflecting the worst instincts of both

communities would certainly do their best to drive the wedge between Arabs and Jews even deeper. END COMMENT.

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Bio Note  
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¶9. (C) Bishara, a Christian and pan-Arab nationalist, has long been considered a provocative figure in Israeli politics. His frequent trips to Syria and Lebanon, including during the Lebanon war, sparked outrage among the Jewish Israeli public, which has long viewed him as a traitorous opportunist who has pushed the envelope of democratic norms his entire life in an effort to bring down the Jewish state from within. The right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu party, led by Avigdor Lieberman, has repeatedly called for his removal from the Knesset.

¶10. (C) Bishara's reputation among Arab Israelis is more complex: His advocacy of an "Israel of all its citizens" -- which Jewish Israelis interpret as code for the destruction of the Jewish character of the state -- is popular among Israel's Arab communities. Arab-Israeli contacts describe Bishara as both the leading Arab intellectual in Israel and also the most arrogant politician the Israeli Arabs have ever put forth. He is respected for his intellect and courage but despised for his self-importance and criticized for his pro-Syrian pandering. Many also worry that his provocative political activities reflect poorly on all Arabs. One prominent Arab-Israeli businessman complained to us that Arabs voted for Bishara to fight for their rights, not to make them look like traitors. Unlike other Arab-Israeli politicians, Bishara almost never performs constituent services and acts bored and dismissive at important community events (e.g. weddings). In recent years, other Arab leaders have called him a hypocrite over his rumored involvement in secret negotiations between Israel and Syria in 2000.

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¶11. (C) But while the near-constant drama surrounding Bishara's public persona appears to have taken a toll on Israel's Arab citizens, his star is clearly rising in the wider Arab world. His current plight even warranted an hour-long, primetime interview on al-Jazeera this week. According to Rosenberg and the Abraham Fund's Mohammed Darawshe, who have known him for years, Bishara may have finally found his niche, as an exiled Arab nationalist intellectual on the regional punditry circuit.

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TEL AVIV 00001147 003 OF 003

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